

[BMCR 2017.03.18](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2017.03.18

Moïra Créte (ed.), *Discours et systèmes de représentation: modèles et transferts de l'écrit dans l'Empire romain. Actes des colloques de Nice (septembre 2009-décembre 2010). Institut des Sciences et Techniques de l'Antiquité (ISTA)*. Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2016. Pp. 338. ISBN 9782848675589. €27.00 (pb).

**Reviewed by Martin Devecka, University of California, Santa Cruz
(mdevecka@ucsc.edu)**

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

Any humanist inquiry needs to take into account the specificity and partiality of the written record by contrast with oral culture. For the classicist, these issues take on a special salience because the oral culture of antiquity is lost to us except insofar as we have it through the medium of writing. Or rather media, since Greco-Roman writing has usually been understood (because of structural divisions within the discipline of classics) to be many and not one: literary texts, yes, which form the general property of all, but also papyri, inscriptions, coins, and graffiti, each the domain of separate groups of scholars with specialized expertise.

The book under review records a collective attempt to erase some of these boundaries. The product of two conferences held in 2009 and 2010 at the Université Nice Sophia Antipolis, it gathers together essays by historians, epigraphers, and literary scholars working to illustrate some ways in which language was able to “jump” from one context to another—oral to written, inscription to literary text and vice-versa—within the cultural world of the Roman Empire.

Empire is a pole that orients, to a greater or lesser degree, every essay in this volume. Some of its contributors work explicitly with the notion of a “discours impériale” as elaborated by Paul Veyne over the last two decades, and many more make implicit gestures toward this concept (17) *Discours et Systèmes*, then, takes “The Roman Empire” as its unit of study. This means an exclusive focus on Greek and Latin, the “universal

languages” of that empire, at the expense of provincial languages, like Coptic and Aramaic, with written traditions of their own that might usefully have been set in comparison with the common tongues of the Empire. Likewise, the essays collected here have little to say about “cross-border” exchanges between the Empire and its neighbors. These concerns aside, *Discours et Systèmes* forms a unity that is more than the sum of its parts.

The volume begins with an introduction by its editor, Moira Crété, which highlights three themes that unite the essays to come: intertextuality, the transfer from oral to written and back again, and the contexts that turn a text into a message (12). The “modèles” of the book’s subtitle are what allows for “transferts” of writing across great distances, both temporal and spatial. The range of these transfers, Crété suggests, practically define Roman society (11).

The remainder of the book is organized under four section headings: “Intertextualité épigraphique,” “Intertextualité littéraire,” “Intertextualité: littérature et épigraphie,” and “Textes, forms et espaces: l’écrit mis en scène.” In what follows, I will offer some highlights from each of these sections by way of indicating how the volume as a whole cashes out the promise of Crété’s introduction.

Stéphane Benoist’s “Identité(s) du prince et discours impériale, l’exemple des titulatures, des Sévères à Julien” makes a promising start for the collection. His aim is to illustrate something about the changing nature of the *statio principis* in the Roman Empire by focusing very narrowly on the development of titlature, whether in public contexts or, more intriguingly, in semi-private contexts where individuals and communities can elaborate on the imperial image in an original fashion (28). Benoist tracks developments of the long term (e.g., the naturalization of “dominus” in imperial titlature) and the short term (e.g. Septimius Severus’ switch from Pertinax to the Antonines as a source of genealogical legitimacy) to show that the emperors’ self-representation through titlature produces a history of the imperial image (20-23). He concludes with a discussion of Constantine (Benoist has little to say about Julian, despite the promise of the paper’s title) in which he suggests that this emperor’s “eternal” self-image should be seen as responding to the turbulent circumstances of his ascent to power (32).

“La légitimité de Constantin aux premiers temps de son pouvoir,” the second of Michel Christole’s two contributions to this volume, resumes this discussion at the point of Constantine’s ascent to the Caesars in 305 CE. Christole’s more precise chronological focus allows him to construct an argument in depth as to Constantine’s conscientious deployment of tetrarchic imagery. On coins – which were obviously liable to empire-wide circulation—and on some milestones, Constantine represents himself from the beginning as one among a college of colleagues; on milestones in the heart of Gaul, though, Constantine’s inscriptions depict him as a Caesar (75), and then as an Augustus (87), ruling alone and without reference to

the collegial arrangements put in place by Diocletian. Christole reads this titulature as belonging to a program of “revendication dynastique” (81) that dates to the beginning of Constantine’s rule.

Both these essays are exemplary in their treatment of the written text as a code that circulates and gets interpreted according to models—and on this process Michel Abernethy’s contribution, “L’implicite et l’explicite dans les inscriptions dédicatoires,” has some valuable remarks to make. If such an approach makes sense with respect to epigraphy and other forms of stereotyped writing, it seems less straightforwardly appropriate to what are conventionally called literary texts. The essays grouped in the volume’s second section skirt this problem, focusing instead on Crète’s oral-written transfers (although, as we shall see, the third section of *Discours et Systèmes* does attempt to cross the comparative bridge between epigraphy and literature.)

Lorenzo Miletto’s “Usage et circulation de l’écrit parmi les néosophistes” is an instance of the new tendency among scholars of imperial Roman literature to take seriously the technologies of literature—the scroll, the pen, the scribe. Miletto searches out these elements in the *Sacred Discourses* of Aelius Aristides, a dream diary that nonetheless represents Aelius’ own writerly and oratorical practices. Aelius thrived in a culture that stressed oral performance, but Miletto argues that much of the background of these performances was, for Aelius at least, quite bookish: Aesculapius commends to Aelius the study of the classics of Attic prose, which he takes up with a gusto (128). Aelius also credits elements of his compositional practice, and especially his obsessive self-editing, to the command of the god (130). In these and other respects, the *Sacred Discourses* give us an entrée onto the written backstage of second-sophistic oratory. Miletto argues convincingly that Aelius saw his written production as more lasting—more monumental—than his spoken words, even though these last were the source of his empire-wide reputation (134-135).

Mickaël Ribreau’s “Le débat contradictoire, cadre énonciatif des ‘traités polémiques’ d’Augustin” shows us an oral-written transfer in the opposite direction. Ribreau traces through Augustine’s career the *topos* of the “débat contradictoire,” a stylized form of oral debate between representatives of rival religious sects. In some early cases—notably, Augustine’s polemics against the Manicheans Fortunatus and Felix—the dialogues that have come down to us are built on stenographic notes from real oral encounters (142). More often, the dialogic style of Augustine’s polemics is only a literary device. *Contra litteras Petilianas*, for instance, is framed as an oral argument despite its title, and despite Donatists’ notorious refusal to confront their orthodox rivals in public debate (147). In this case, Augustine’s literary strategy brought charges of misrepresentation; thereafter, Augustine still produced polemics in dialogue form but without the overt markers of orality that might have led readers to mistake them for records of a real oral event (150). In Augustine’s hands, then, the “débat contradictoire” is transformed from an oral practice into a literary “cadre énonciatif” (154). Although we know of plenty of instances in which

literature has appropriated oral forms—think of the history of the ancient epic—it is rare that we can see this happening over the lifetime of a single author.

Can a similar process of “literarization” be invoked to explain forms of intertextuality between epigraphy and literature? The first essay in the volume’s next section, Emanuelle Valette’s “De la commémoration rituelle des morts au recueil poétique: l’écriture des *Parentalia* d’Ausone” treats a possible test case. Ausonius’ *Parentalia*, a collection of poems celebrating the author’s deceased family members, appropriates the format of the epitaph, a longstanding practice in Greek and Roman poetry alike (201). As Valette shows, however, these poems also incorporate a whole range of other Roman funerary ritual, from mourning songs to (at the level of the collection’s ordering) the funeral parade of wax *imagines* (206-210). Ausonius introduces these other intertextualities by way of making a place for himself, as the speaking voice, in an epitaphic tradition that typically privileges the decedent as speaker (216).

A different approach to the problem—and again, one that reverses the direction of flow between inscription and literature—is presented by Moira Crété, the volume’s editor, in her contribution, “La topique de l’*elogium* dans les hommages publics.” Her argument, simply put, is that the *elogium* is a lapidary topic whose origins lie in the rhetorical handbooks of the second sophistic (241). To prove this is a matter of identifying the *topoi* involved in an oratorical *elogium* of the second century CE with those that appear on inscriptions of praise in the centuries that follow (242). Crété’s arguments in this regard are ingenious and insightful, but a theoretical quibble arises: is it possible to assert an intertextual connection between literature and stone on the basis of something so broad as a rubric of praise, especially when the inscriptions Crété treats are so terse? Some may feel that the connections drawn by Crété are simply too sparse in detail to carry conviction.

The last section of the volume, which turns toward the *mise en scène* of the written word in the Roman Empire, strikes me both as disconnected to the remainder of the book and, in itself, relatively weaker than the other three sections. Though all the pieces it contains present interesting data, not all of them make arguments at the same level of theoretical interest as the other contributions to *Discours et Systèmes*. An exception is Sylvia Orlando’s “Discorsi su pietra: qualche osservazioni su forma e contenuto,” which discusses the formal difficulties posed by certain longer discursive inscriptions that seem to abandon the straightforward legibility of most public epigraphy in favor of cramming as much content onto a cut piece of stone as possible (189-290). She connects the proliferation of such inscriptions with a secular transformation of values according to which the inscription no longer communicates chiefly as a written message, but as a sign that someone has taken the trouble to make an inscription (291).

The collection is ably concluded by Stéphane Benoist, who investigates the *Res gestae divi Augusti* from theoretical perspectives opened up by the

other contributors and does some of the work of connecting these contributions to the goals set forth by Créte in the *avant-propos*.

As with any volume of this nature, uniformity of quality and coherence of orientation are desiderata never to be achieved. However, *Discours et Systèmes* gets further toward these goals—especially the latter—than most such volumes do. The essays here collected do show, in a number of interesting and sometimes innovative ways, how writing circulated in the social world of the Roman Empire—not only through time and space, but also across media. If it remains difficult to say that the Empire had writing, as opposed to writings, at least this collection has demonstrated that these writings need to be understood as part of a complex network rather than in isolation.

Table of Contents

Avant-propos, Moira Créte

I. Intertextualité épigraphique

1. Stéphane Benoist, Identité(s) du prince et discours impériale, l'exemple des titulatures, des Sévères à Julien
2. Michel Christole, L'affirmation de la gloire: la légitimation du pouvoir de Septime Sévère dans l'épigraphie
3. Michel Christole, La légitimité de Constantin au premier temps de son pouvoir: inscriptions, monnaies, panégyriques
4. Michel Aberson, L'implicite et l'explicite dans les inscriptions dédicatoires (République-Empire)

II. Intertextualité littéraire

5. Lorenzo Miletto, Usage et circulation de l'écrit parmi les néosophistes. Le cas d'Aelius Aristide.
6. Mickaël Ribreau, Le débat contradictoire, cadre énonciatif des "traités polémiques" d'Augustin.
7. Marion Faure-Ribreau, De la scène au *volumen*: Quintilien lecteur de la comédie romaine.
8. Laurie Lefebvre, L'historien antique face à ses sources: Eusèbe de Césarée lecteur de Flavius Josèphe.

III. Intertextualité: littérature et épigraphie.

9. Emmanuelle Valette, De la commémoration rituelle des morts au recueil poétique: l'écriture des *Parentalia* d'Ausone.
10. Antony Hostein, Panégyrique et épigraphie. Observations sur le Panégyrique latin VIII(5).
11. Moira Créte, La topique de l'elogium dans les hommages publics.

IV. Textes, forms et espaces: l'écrit mis en scène.

12. Nicolas Mathieu, Couples et familles dans les monuments funéraires des contrées gallo-germaniques: quelques remarques à propos de la relation entre texte(s) et image(s)
13. Silvia Orlando, Discorsi su pietra: qualche osservazione su forma e contenuto.

14. Sabine Lefebvre, Pline le Jeune et l'épigraphie: témoignages sur la place de l'écrit dans l'espace civique.

Conclusion, Stéphane Benoist

